Information Brief

Violence Prevention

After each school shooting, the most often posed question was "Why?" followed by "Could they have prevented it?" Lessons learned indicate that there is no single explanation of the cause for the shootings, nor is there a simple answer for what to do to prevent future tragedies. Nevertheless, there is a great deal of knowledge about what works and steps that schools can take to increase the likelihood that "it will never happen here." A plan for creating a safe school is complete only when it includes a comprehensive violence prevention program with a crisis management plan that includes strategies for preparedness, response, and recovery.

> *"All the crisis planning in the world can never truly prepare a school and community for the trauma associated with the violent death of children. This is compounded when the violence is perpetrated by another child or adolescent on a school campus."*
>
> *- Karen Kleinz, NSPRA*
> *National Association of Elementary School Principals*

INTRODUCTION

During the 1999-2000 school year, 3.5 percent (13) of Iowa school districts reported 20 disciplinary actions taken against students for carrying firearms to school. By the same token on the 1999 Iowa Youth Survey, six percent of students from 329 school districts reported that they had carried guns to school in the last 12 months. Although national statistics show a decreasing trend in overall violence in schools, two areas have raised the question, "How safe are our schools?" Both have received national attention – school shootings and bullying. In order to address these issues, allay the fears of students, school personnel, parents, and the public, and create a school environment that supports teaching and learning, there is an array of effective prevention and preparedness strategies that schools can undertake to meet the challenge.

> *"In the longer term, we will be searching for answers, none of which will be easy. Answers must come from our families, our faith, our communities, our schools and our neighborhoods. I am convinced that one of those answers must be to listen more closely to what our children are telling us."*
>
> *- Drew Edmundson,*
> *Oklahoma Attorney General*

The prevention strategies described in this brief are based on the following premises:

- *Day-to-day minor disruptions and incivility* can escalate into serious, life-threatening violence. Because there is a relationship between minor disruptions and serious violence, it is critical that schools do all they can to reduce the risk posed by daily disruptions.

- *Violence is preventable:* The sudden eruption of unexpected violence in each of the school shootings and their apparent unpredictability may cause some to question whether or not such violence is preventable. There is no guarantee that schools will be violence free if they implement comprehensive prevention programs. However, on the average, those with such programs will see a reduction in disruptive behavior and will lower their chances for serious violence.

> *"The intensifying and automatic use of punishment as opposed to prevention of misbehavior and violence in schools, makes the schoolhouse toxic for too many children."*
>
> *- I.A. Hyman & P.A. Snook*

- *There is no "silver bullet."* The initial response by schools to the recent shootings was to take immediate "quick fix" solutions by installing metal detectors and surveillance cameras, expanding zero tolerance suspensions and expulsions, profiling students thought to be potential perpetrators, and adopting school uniforms. While these strategies may provide short-term solutions, they do little to yield long-term and meaningful results. There is little to no data supporting any single strategy to keep schools safe. Instead, the most effective programs are comprehensive, multi-strategy approaches.

- *Effective prevention requires ongoing planning and commitment.* Programs that effectively address school safety issues are the result of ongoing commitment and collaborative planning. No strategies can be effectively implemented without the full involvement of and cooperation with students, families, and community members.

THE PREVENTION OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE

Characteristics of Prevention Strategies

The natural reaction of school administrators to the recent incidents of school shooters was to take steps to secure their schools, giving themselves, their students, parents, and communities the perception of safety. To address their feelings of vulnerability, many invested in the purchase of expensive security devices such as metal detectors, identification card scanners, and surveillance

cameras. Still others hired security personnel to guard their campuses.

> *"What schools are doing is creating conditions that are comparable to prisons. It's based on fear, and it's an understandable reaction given the circumstances, but the problem is that they're not looking at other solutions.*
> — *Renate Nummeia Caine, Professor Emeritus*
> *California State University, San Bernadino*

Such actions have raised concerns among experts in violence prevention. While they acknowledge that there may be a role for such actions, they also caution that when administrators define school safety as the absence of serious violent behavior, policy makers and other stakeholders may mistakenly adopt expensive, narrowly focused strategies such as investing in security technology without addressing school climate (Sprague and Walker, 2001). They warn that the prison-like atmosphere created by such measures can have a negative psychological impact on students and on the learning environment (Easterbrook, 1999).

> *"Although necessary and appropriate, law enforcement and technological supports need to be balance with the overall mission of schooling, which is to promote academic excellence, socialization, citizenship, and healthy lives for our children."*
> — *J. Sprague & H.M. Walker*

Robert Linquanti and BethAnn Berliner of the Western Regional Center for Drug-Free Schools and Communities have created a system for categorizing violence prevention strategies that may help administrators achieve a balanced approach. They begin by dividing strategies into three categories: "Responding to Emergency," "Moving Away from Crisis," and "Preparing Today for the Future." In turn, three dimensions – temporal, behavioral, and focal – define each of these categories.

Temporal represents the timeframe for implementing and expecting benefit from a given strategy, from immediate results to long-term benefits.
Behavioral identifies the locus of control inherent in the strategy. Short-term crisis management strategies typically rely upon controls external to and independent of the responsibility of the student. On the other hand, strategies that teach students life skills and that have a lasting impact on their attitudes and behaviors develop self-control and self-management that rely on an internal locus of control.
Focal refers to the scope of a strategy, whether it is narrowly focused for a specific purpose, such as metal detectors specifically targeted to reduce the number of weapons brought onto school grounds, or

creating a positive, inclusive school climate and culture through school-wide approaches.

For an example of this categorization of strategies, see the table on page 4 of this information brief.

Violence Prevention Strategies
There is no single solution to school violence. Consistently, programs that effectively reduce violence are proactive rather than reactive and use multiple components to successfully address the complexity of school disruption and violence. Five steps should be included in each initiative.

1. Secure the school.
Environmental Design - The physical layout of the school and grounds rarely receives consideration when addressing school safety issues. Yet today's architectural knowledge and techniques can enhance safety and improve security in the design and retrofitting of schools. Creative

> *"…an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of metal detectors."*
> –*Linda Lantieri*

environmental design can improve the smooth operation of a school, prevent interpersonal conflict, and reduce opportunities for vandalism, violence, and the victimization of others (e.g., bullying and harassment). Such thoughtful planning can be cost-effective and make schools "cathedrals of learning" rather than "fortresses of fear" (Edwards, 2000).

Other strategies that help secure the school are closed campuses, identification badges, improved communication systems, confidential reporting systems, use of school resource officers, and increased supervision. Target hardening schools with metal detectors and surveillance cameras also may be used although there is no evidence to date of their effectiveness in preventing school violence.

2. Address the peer culture and its problems.
An important target of prevention efforts should be the peer culture if schools are to be successful in becoming safer, more civil environments. "The norms, actions, beliefs and values of a broad sector of today's peer culture are socially destructive and demeaning" (Walker, 2001). As young people try to negotiate the complex and difficult task of gaining acceptance among peers, there are some who do not "fit."

Bullying and harassment are often the *modus operandi* of this toxic peer culture, resulting in isolation and rejection of a youth seeking his or her place. Unfortunately, peers often encourage such behavior and adults tacitly support it by not responding. Although changing this culture is a formidable task for which a school is not solely responsible, schools are a primary place, in addition to the family, that can address it effectively. Programs that create a positive peer culture of caring and civility hold

promise for achieving this result. Such programs include the *Resolving Conflict Creatively Program*, *Second Step*, the *Anti-Bullying Program*, *Bully Proofing Your School*, *Steps to Respect*, *By Kids, For Kids*, and *Not My Friends, Not My School*. School-wide discipline programs that establish behavioral expectations and predictable, consistently implemented rewards and consequences can become the context for practicing lessons learned in instructional programs.

3. Involve parents in making the school safer.

Parents, like school personnel, are concerned about the safety of schools. They have a great deal to offer in making that environment safe. Parent involvement can begin at home where parents can teach their children nonviolent ways to handle anger and to deal with conflict, especially bullying. In addition, parents can strive to provide their child with consistent discipline and supervision.

4. Create a positive, inclusive school climate and culture.

Although much of the attention regarding school violence has been on the characteristics of the perpetrators, Sprague and Walker (2000) identify a variety of school practices that are factors in the development of antisocial behavior and potential violence. These include 1) poor instruction that contributes to academic failure; 2) failure to individualize instruction to adapt to individual differences; 3) failure to assist students from at risk backgrounds to bond with the schooling process; 4) inconsistent and punitive disciplinary and behavior management practices; 5) unclear rules and expectations for appropriate behavior; failure to correct rule violations and reward adherence to them; and 6) lack of opportunity to learn and practice prosocial interpersonal and self-management skills.

The challenge is to create a school culture that is based on positive values about how we treat each other – staff to staff, staff to students, student to student, and students to staff. Among these values are civility, integrity, caring, and respect. The research of Gottfredson and others shows that environmental strategies that promote a positive, inclusive and accepting school climate are key components for addressing violence in schools. Strategies proven effective in creating such a culture are proactive school-wide discipline systems, systematic social skills instruction, academic/ curricular re-structuring, early screening and identification of antisocial behavior, and behaviorally based interventions. Universal approaches that train and encourage the entire school population to stay in control of their anger and responses to conflict are beneficial to the entire school community.

> *"…what we do in our schools on a day-to-day basis in terms of discipline may be related to serious crime and violence."*
> - R. Skiba and R. Peterson

5. Develop a written school safety and crisis response plan.

School safety plans include both the strategies for prevention that may be incorporated into the district's Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (CSIP) and a crisis management plan that includes preparedness, crisis response, and recovery procedures for a wide range of potentially dangerous situations. Although we may not be able to predict when or where a violent incident will occur, we can be prepared to deal with it when it does. School districts should involve a safety team that is composed of administrators, teachers, building support staff, students, parents, law enforcement, community emergency management personnel, and law enforcement. The team should disseminate plans widely accompanied by comprehensive training to ensure proficiency.

SUMMARY

Although there is no guarantee that any single act of violence in a school can be prevented, it is clear that schools can implement an array of strategies to avert such tragedies. Experts tell us that comprehensive prevention programs that include short, medium and long term strategies ranging from crisis management plans to the changing of school cultures have great promise for reducing the likelihood for such occurrences. By implementing comprehensive programs that improve the overall school climate, we may be able to reduce the risk for serious, violent behavior and, at the same time, improve the environment for learning.

LEARN MORE ABOUT IT:
- **Web sites:**
    - Indiana Educational Policy Center: http://www.indiana.edu/~iepc/
    - Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior: http://www.uoregon.edu/~ivdb
- **In this Handbook:** See "*Success4* Critical Elements," "*Inclusive Schools Communities and Schools*," (a vision of the State Board of Education), the information briefs in this section, and the *Crisis Management* planning section of this handbook.